A Starlight View of Islam's Past



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Introduction

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most merciful

Relating stories about past events is the best way to connect present and future generations with their ancestors. It is the best way of remembering the deeds and events of those who have gone before and encourages future generations to learn and cherish their heritage.

Islamic history is one of knowledge, piety, *jihad*, bravery, generosity, courtesy, kindness and the bringing of people out of darkness into light. When Islam came, it was like a bright, shining sun in a sea of darkness and ignorance. Not only did it give light and warmth to the people who entered its fold, it also benefited all mankind and all the creatures of Allah.

Once, the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, went to a garden and saw a camel that was so thin its bone were clearly visible through the skin, and its eyes were sunken and hollow. When the camel saw the Blessed Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, it approached him and put its head gently on his feet. The Blessed Prophet was deeply moved by the camel's distress and stroked its head tenderly. Then he called for the camel's owner and said to him: 'Fear Allah. do not torment these creatures. Allah has made you their master. it is for you to take care of them and treat them properly. Work them only as much as they are able. Feed them well and look after them and keep them nicely.'

Once, when someone took an egg from a bird's nest, the bird became very disturbed. When the Prophet, may

Allah bless him and grant him peace, saw what had happened, he told the person to replace the egg in the nest.

There are very few Islamic history books available in the English Language, and fewer still for children. the few books which are available do not present Islamic history accurately. The only book I can recommend with complete satisfaction is that written by Sayyed Abul Hasan 'Ali Nadwi: '*Islam and the World, the Rise and Decline of Muslims and its Effect on Mankind*'. There is a great need for such books, as they present the true picture of Islamic history and what Islam contributed to mankind.

Most Islamic history books available in European languages present Islam in a manner that creates fear and mistrust of Islam and Muslims in people's minds. We have therefore decided to bring out a series of books on this subject. Giving priority to children, we present 'A Starlight View of Islam's Past', an imaginary narrative of Islamic history written by Sayyed Abul Hasan 'Ali Nadwi who is known for his commanding knowledge of this subject. It is hoped that this will create among children an eagerness to discover their history, to learn from their success, and avoid the shortcomings of their ancestors, and consequences.

Allah is the First and the Last, and with His Favour, all good deeds are accomplished.

Sha'ban 1426 **Iqbal Ahmad Azami**
September 2005

A HEART-WARMING SCENE

At school I learned that light travels at a speed of 186 thousand miles per second and in less than a second it can go round the earth seven times.

I heard that the light of some stars only arrives here after 2000 years, and the light of other stars takes even longer to arrive. The light of some stars has begun to travel but has still not reached us.

I love history. I like to imagine that past events are happening now and the people involved in them are still alive. I regret that I have missed seeing events take place and was unable to visit great men of history while they were alive.

When I was a child I used to say: 'I wish I could have seen the Flood of Noah, the testing of Abraham, the exodus of the tribe of Israel and the coming of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, which took place more than 1000 years before I was born. I wish I had been alive at the time of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs and when Baghdad was the centre of civilisation or when Cordoba and Granada were flourishing.'

I have missed a great deal.

I wish time would go backwards and I could travel back through time. I wish history would be the present again so that I could live through what has already gone by.

I used to think that someone on a star whose light would only reach the earth in hundreds or thousands of years would be able to see the world as it was hundreds or thousands of years ago. Then it would be possible for the people of the stars to witness past history as it was occurring. That thought made me very happy. It was as if I had found something that was lost. I told my Science teacher about my theory.

The teacher said: 'Yes, if we were to imagine someone on the sun, which is more than ninety-three million miles from the earth, he would only see what happened on earth eight seconds ago. This is because it takes eight seconds for the light of the sun to reach the earth.

'So going on from that, we could say that if there was someone on a distant star whose light reaches the earth in thousands of years, he could see the events of earlier history and what happened thousands of years ago.'

I continued to think about the height of the stars, their distance from the earth and their people seeing what happened on the earth, until I seemed to be looking at the earth through an enormous telescope.

I was looking at the earth I knew, but the people were not the same. I saw mosques full of people praying and I saw that the whole population lived according to the Islamic code. I moved the telescope and looked again. There was no immorality, no drunkenness and no gambling.



I looked at a region which had many palm trees and a simple mosque. A cloud of divine light enveloped it and I recognised it as the city of the Messenger, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. Although the houses were humble, built of unbaked bricks, I could



see here the ambassadors of great states and the sons of kings who had embraced Islam. Even the revenues of Persia and Byzantium were brought here. I knew that this small city, in spite of its simplicity, ruled the world.



I searched the city but I could find neither a law court nor a prison. I said to myself: 'Where are legal cases heard? Where are criminals detained?' Then I saw a man sitting in the mosque of the Prophet. He wore a tattered garment but his bearing was majestic. Two men were before him presenting their legal case with the simplicity of bedouins from the desert. They were saying: 'One of us has wronged the other, judge between us and guide us to the Straight Path.'

The man judged the case calmly and with deliberation. Then he said to the claimant, 'Have you any proof against the defendant? Or will he take an oath?' The man produced his just witnesses. Judgement was given for him, and the case was over in an hour. The two parties rose to leave. They were content with the judgement of the *Shari'ah*. I said: 'These people do not need a court nor lawyers.'

I saw that the doors of the houses were left open at night. I saw that the Treasury which contained the vast revenues of Persia, was left unguarded. The crown of Chosroes, which was worth hundreds of thousands of dinars, was brought in. It had fallen as booty to a humble soldier who gave it to the army commander who, in turn, sent it to the Caliph. Thieves who stole from the Treasury had their hands cut off. I said: 'These people have no need of prison or custodial sentences.'

I looked in their houses. I saw a pure and pleasing lifestyle unspoilt by envy, hatred or greed. These people put the needs of others first, even if they themselves were suffering hardship. They were so considerate to one another that when a man gave his neighbour a gift he would pass it on to another neighbour. It would go from one to another until it would end up with the first man again. The strong did not tyrannise the weak. The rich did not exploit the poor.

The Caliph was kind to everyone and the *amirs* among them set a good example by living according to the Islamic code. The people respected them and obeyed them. They lived in close harmony with each other.

I peeped into the army barracks and found that the soldiers were not morally corrupt, neither were they distanced from Islam. During the day, they were warriors, but at night they spent their time remembering Allah. They set an example to the people. They paid for everything they used and they always entered a room with a greeting of peace. They turned away from forbidden things and lowered their gaze. I said: 'If the common soldiers are like this, what are the pious Muslims like?' I decided that this must be the era of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs and what I had read about them in history was true.

THE VAST SPREAD OF ISLAM

From a lower star than the previous one, I saw that changes had taken place. The capital of Islam had moved from Madinah to Damascus in Syria. Lofty fortresses had beautiful curtains on their doors and their walls were covered in sumptuous decorations.

There were splendid mosques whose minarets thrust upwards towards the heavens. They were filled with people praying.

I could see students sitting in circles gathering knowledge. The mosques were full of students studying Islam. Scholars of *hadith* were relating the words of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and their listeners were busy writing and memorising.

I saw different types of people – ascetics, worshippers and students. I saw signs of affluence and luxury. I also saw how the rich and arrogant lead their lives. I saw how people differ according to their status.

I saw the Islamic legal system being carried out and some of the judgements of the *Shari'ah* being implemented. I saw men of Islamic scholarship calling people to their faith. The believers were suitably

humble when corrected and they showed deep respect to the religious scholars.

I saw the Caliph and the *amirs* praying with the common people, sitting with them and speaking to them. I saw an Arab city where the Caliphs were giving the poets generous salaries and slaughtering animals to feed the people. I saw that the Islamic state had expanded until it reached the borders of India on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other. Such a



distance could not be crossed in less than five months even on the swiftest camel.

I said: 'This must be the time of the Umayyads at the end of the first century.'

Then I went down lower still and I saw a new city on the banks of the Tigris. The population was made up of Arabs and Persians, Indians and Turks. I saw the palace of the Caliph and, like the palaces of the Persian kings, it was guarded by Turks. It was the same with the palaces of the ministers. I saw these men go out in huge processions with great pomp and ceremony.

I saw people selling doves for high prices. There were fighting cocks and dogs and I saw many people taking part in many other types of sport. I said: 'This has come about from having too much wealth and mixing with the non-Arabs.'

I saw the Head *Qadi* and other *qadis* surrounded by people who were complaining of injustices. One case might last many days. I saw that the prisons were full of criminals, thieves and scoundrels.

I also saw mosques still full of people praying. Schools were crammed with students of *din* and the lecture halls were packed. I saw people cutting off their forelocks and fainting and repenting of their sins. Non-Muslims were now embracing Islam in every mosque. I said: 'These people still have hearts,



and the *din* still has power over their hearts and souls.'

I saw deeply religious men cut themselves off from all the trappings of the state. Muslims from Khorasan, India and Persia flocked to them to find pure Islam. Even kings and *amirs* visited them to learn from them. I witnessed the strength and power of true Islam and its ability to confront materialism.

I saw the largest empire on earth, whose Caliph would look up at the clouds and say: 'Wherever you drop rain, the tax from the crops you water will come to me.'

I said: 'This must be Baghdad, the capital of the 'Abbasid dynasty. Perhaps I am in the third century.'





I glanced over at the Straits of Gibraltar. There I saw a flourishing city of lofty buildings near its shores. I could see palaces with irrigated gardens and paved roads which had lighting. I saw gushing fountains, raised bridges, decorated mosques and ornate *madrasahs*. I remembered what I had read about the city of Cordoba. It covered an area sixteen miles long by six miles wide and it contained 113,000 palaces and houses, 80,400 shops, 700 mosques, 900 bath houses and 4,300 storehouses. The population of the city was more than a million.

I saw spacious parks and magnificent gardens, streets paved with stone, and pavilions set up where travellers could take refuge from the heat. I saw



markets filled with luxury goods from distant lands and hostels provided for the merchants and travellers.

Beside the huge city of Cordoba I saw a small city. I had never seen anything on the face of the earth more beautiful. I said: 'This must be Madinat-az-Zahra, which was famous in history and I am now in the fourth century. This is the time of the king of Andalusia, 'Abdur-Rahman an-Nasir, who reigned for fifty years or his son, al-Hakam the Second.'

THE DESTRUCTION OF OUR HERITAGE

Turning from the West to the East I saw a vast, powerful dynasty whose capital was Nishapur and which ruled Khorasan, Iraq and Persia. Its Seljuq kings were the real rulers in Baghdad. They appointed and dismissed whom they chose.

One of the kings, Alp Arsalan, attacked the Europeans in their homes. He captured their king and imposed the *jizyah* or poll tax on the Christians. This Muslim state reached its peak during the reign of his son, Malik Shah (508–11 AH/1114–17 CE) and his excellent minister, Nizamul-Mulk Tusi.

I saw the Nizamiyyah Madrasah in Baghdad filled with such worthy scholars as Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. The Seljuq state funded the *madrasahs*. I also saw its sister Nizamiyyah Madrasah in Nishapur where Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni studied. I was so impressed by what I saw that I prayed for the Seljuq state, its king and its minister.

Then I saw the Europeans, carrying crosses, advancing upon the Muslim lands. They were coming from all directions.

I saw armies of Crusaders pouring out of Europe to take Jerusalem. They killed a large number of



Muslims until their blood flowed in the streets of this Holy city. They also took cities in Syria and Palestine, and challenged Egypt and Iraq and coveted the Hijaz.

I watched these events unfold then I turned back to the Seljuq state in Nishapur. I asked myself: 'Where are those kings who attacked the Europeans and defeated them time after time?' I watched the behaviour of the Muslims. They were spending their time with amusements and other distractions. They used force only to attack one another and not to confront an enemy.

The kings, ministers, scholars and the people were all ignoring the threat from the Europeans. I feared for Islam and the future of Muslims who were straying from the *din*.

Then came Sultan Nuruddin az-Zengi (541–69 AH/1146–73 CE) and Sultan Salahuddin Ayyubi (581–91 AH/1185–95 CE). Sultan az-Zengi fought the Europeans and captured Edessa from them, making him a hero throughout the Muslim world.

The celebrated Salahuddin carried on a vigorous policy of *jihad* against the Crusaders which unified Islamic strength. The armies of the Turks, Kurds and Arabs fought together and defeated the Christians at Tiberias. Salahuddin summoned Balbarnas, who had sworn to desecrate the grave of the Messenger of Allah, and cut off his head, saying: 'Today I have helped Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace.'

With the victory of Hittin in 583 AH/1187 CE, the Holy city of Jerusalem again became Muslim after eighty years. The Syrian cities were also recaptured and Muslims all over the world rejoiced. It was the victory of all victories. One Muslim said of Salahuddin: 'This is the one for whom the days were waiting. He fulfilled for Allah what people had vowed.'

Then I went down to an even lower star and I saw that same Baghdad which I had visited only seconds before. Hordes of Mongols were swarming all over it, destroying it completely. Muslim blood flowed everywhere and a tower was built from Muslims' skulls. They killed the Caliph al-Musta'sim (640–56 AH/1242–58 CE) and threw the precious books of Islamic scholarship into the River Tigris.





Sometimes the river was black with books and at other times it was red with Muslim blood. I only recognised the city because I knew it was situated on the bank of the Tigris.

The Mongols were spreading over the Muslim world, intent on total destruction. Great Muslim cities were left in ruins. Mosques were demolished, houses burned and all the people slaughtered. They destroyed the state of Khwarizm Shah in Khorasan and put an end to the 'Abbasid caliphate in Iraq.

The Muslims submitted in fear and cowardice. They could not even imagine being able to defeat the Mongols. A famous saying was: 'If you are told that the Mongols have been defeated, do not believe it.'

I feared once more for Islam. I said: 'Perhaps these are its last hours.' However, to my great surprise and relief, the Mongols were embracing Islam in great numbers, and the conquerors of the Muslims were themselves conquered by Islam. I was convinced that Islam is eternal and will defeat every conqueror.

But then the Muslims became weak throughout the Muslim world. The only spark of life was in Asia Minor in an independent state founded by the warrior Uthman Khan.

His offspring, Muhammad the Second (known as Muhammad *al-Fatih*) conquered Constantinople, the capital of the Christian world in 853 AH/1454 CE.

He made it the capital of his kingdom. He was followed by other great kings who invaded Europe and defeated Christian nations.

Then I looked at Andalusia again. Cordoba, and the Muslim cities around it had been destroyed by the Christians. The mosques had become their churches and bells replaced the *adhan*. Arabs with Christian beliefs and a state of ignorance had replaced the flourishing Islamic culture. *'Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*, We belong to Allah and to Him we return', I said and I wept as I spoke.

As my eyes roved over Andalusia I noticed that Muslim Arab Granada was an Island of Islam in a sea of faithlessness. However, it was not long before Granada, too, fell into Christian hands when the Christian king Ferdinand and his queen Isabella, overpowered it in 879 AH/1474 CE. I saw Abu 'Abdullah, the last of the kings of the Banu'l-Ahmar, surrender to her the keys of his kingdom. He bid a sad farewell to Granada and its citadel, the Alhambra, and fled to Morocco.

Muslim Andalusia was soon transformed into a Christian land and the Arab community was forced to abandon its faith. I saw mosques destroyed or turned into churches. Schools lay empty, libraries were burnt and graves desecrated. The surviving Muslims were put to death. Christianity overpowered the land in





which Islam had ruled for eight centuries. There was no one to utter the word of Islam or believe in the Messenger of Allah.

This sight really upset and alarmed me. Then I found myself back in the present time. I thought, Perhaps Allah has done me a good turn for He has shown me various periods of Islamic history and all sorts of Muslims. I have seen the Rightly-Guided Caliphs and their achievements as well as Muslims in decline. Allah has shown me how the unbelievers embraced Islam and how conquerors could be humble. He showed me how Muslim lands were lost through neglect and misbehaviour by Muslims themselves.

I promised myself that I would be a soldier for Islam for the rest of my life. I would defend its sanctity so that the tragedy of Andalusia would not be repeated.



Glossary

Adhan: call to prayer.

Amir: a leader or ruler, a term generally used for provincial/regional rulers.

Al-Fatih: the conqueror. It became the title of the Ottoman Caliph, Muhammad the Second, who conquered Constantinople.

Jihad: to struggle in the way of Allah. To serve the Islamic cause which includes fighting in the way of Allah against His enemies, as and when necessary.

Jizyah: a tax levied on non-Muslim subjects of an Islamic state, against the responsibility of guarding their lives, honour and property. It should be noted that Muslims pay *Zakah* on their property and every able Muslim is subject to be called up for army service whenever the need arises, from which non-Muslims are exempt in an Islamic state.

Madinat-az-Zahra: Az-Zahra, a city in Andalusia.

Madrasah: place of learning, an Islamic school.

Qadi: a jurist, justice for an Islamic court.



